In 1819, Mary Shelley wrote a novella that she entitled simply *Matilda*. The title character is a dark, brooding figure whose father, Shelley later reveals, fell in love with her. Shelley’s decision to name her character *Matilda* is not unusual. In fact, Shelley’s character is but one in a long series of Matildas who appeared in the literary works published in Romantic Britain. The prevalence of the name should not be dismissed merely as coincidence or popular convention. Authors had used the name *Matilda* long before Shelley wrote her novella, but by the time Shelley used the name, it had acquired special meaning shaped by Continental—and especially German—influences. Romantic authors transformed a name traditionally associated with strength and nobility into an emblem of feminine transgression and irrational behavior.

This essay will explore frequent recurrences of the name *Matilda* throughout the British Romantic Period as a means of defining what I term the *Romantic conceit*, an idea whose sustained presence becomes a shared cultural construct with special meaning. The essay traces the name to primarily Continental sources, with special emphasis on Dante and Spenser, on members of the British royal family with Continental connections, and on Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*. The juxtaposition of historical and biographical sources suggests that the Romantics appropriated this name traditionally associated with strength and nobility to transform it into an emblem of feminine transgression and irrational behavior. Romantic Matildas are connected with physical violence, with incest, and with direct challenges to religious and political authority.
as presented most visibly in Gothic literature. As the Romantic Period progressed, the connotations associated with the name coalesced into a well defined set so that a mere invocation of the name also invoked revolutionary sentiment.